

Aging and Growing Old Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 Sermon

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Today I'm continuing to reflect on what I'm learning at the Gordon-Conwell Ockenga Fellows retreats. Last time I talked about death and dying, but today I want to talk about aging—about growing old. Now obviously I have more years than some of you and less than others. So I'll do the best I can to teach what the Bible has to say about aging, death, and dying. I'm also going to share some of what others who know better than I have to say about it. And I plan to share a few personal experiences as I reflect on this topic.

What counts as old or elderly? We don't like being called "old" because it's seen as a negative. NPR reports the preferred phrase is "elderly" or "older adults" or just call people by their names. I define older adults or the elderly as anyone over the age of 70. Now if you're over 70 and you don't like that, I'm sorry! My parents who usually listen to my sermons might have something to say about my definition when they listen to it. The Psalms do say we typically get 70 years or 80 if due to strength so I think it's fair (Psalm 90:10).

But today I'm not really talking to the older or elderly. I actually want to primarily address anyone in their youth, so teenagers, those in their 20s or 30s or anyone who considers themselves to be youthful. I'll even include those who call themselves "young at heart." I'm including myself here too. Today's message is for us because today's passage is for those who haven't yet arrived at the final chapter. But how we live now impacts how we will live out that final chapter. Here's how the first verse in Ecclesiastes twelve goes.

Ecclesiastes 12:1

Remember your Creator

in the days of your youth,

before the days of trouble come

and the years approach when you will say,

"I find no pleasure in them"— (NIV)

The book of Ecclesiastes addresses us in our youthful years. The author, King Solomon, wrote Ecclesiastes to be a book of wisdom from a more cynical perspective. In this book, Solomon challenges young people to remember their Creator before they grow old (aka. "...before the days of trouble come"). Now if you're a teenager or in your 20s or 30s, growing old is probably the last thing on your mind. If you're 15, you have another 55 more years before you turn 70. That's a long time! But what better time is there than now to start preparing for old age? You'll be so ready (Lord willing) when old age arrives.

Today I want to talk about three things 1) what it's like to grow old (biologically, mentally, emotionally); 2) how we should treat the elderly (should we respect them or brush them aside?); and 3) how we should live today knowing that one day old age will arrive. So first...

1) What's it like to grow old?

Now starting in verse 2 Solomon uses metaphors (that is figures of speech, non-literal word pictures) to describe what the body experiences as it ages.

Ecclesiastes 12:2-8

2 before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;

What's he describing here? He's describing a loss of sight. Many of us have either heard of or personally experienced cataracts, which is a clouding of vision. According to the National Eye Institute (NEI), "Most cataracts are related to aging. Cataracts are very common in older people. By age 80, more than half of all Americans either have a cataract or have had cataract surgery." Part of growing old is the dimming of sight, and that's really hard. It's disabling.

3 when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;

As you get older your hands begin to tremble (tremors), and your back begins to hunch over. What are your grinders? Your teeth. Your gums recede, your teeth look longer, and your teeth even fall out. Did you know "By the age of sixty, people in an industrialized country like the United States have lost, on average, a third of their teeth. After eighty-five, almost 40 percent have no teeth at all." Being Mortal (affiliate link)

4 when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when people rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;

This is talking about a loss of hearing (sound fades) and trouble sleeping (rise at sound of birds). In college I lived with an older couple, Ernest and Evelyn. I think they were in their 80s at the time. Ernest had to wear a hearing aid or he had a lot of trouble hearing. That's pretty typical for many older adults. Likewise, he was always up before me. Many elderly go to bed later and wake up earlier than most teenagers.

5 when people are afraid of heights (afraid of falling over)
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms (sometimes they turn white, so maybe this is speaking of hair; but the blossoms can also turn pink - some elderly people do die their hair pink)
and the grasshopper drags itself along (trouble walking)
and desire no longer is stirred. (lack of sexual desire)
Then people go to their eternal home
and mourners go about the streets. (That's talking about death and dying)

Have you ever heard an elderly person talk about more and more of their friends dying? The next two verses, verses 6-7, really talk about how life is poured out the older you get. Life is coming to an end. It can be really mentally and emotionally discouraging.

6 Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
and the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
and the wheel broken at the well,

7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Verse 7 is talking about death. From dust you came and to dust you shall return (Gen 3:19; Eccle 3:20). So how might we feel about all of this, Solomon asks, especially if you don't know the Lord? How will you feel and think about death and dying if you do not know a God who saves and restores?

8 “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.
“Everything is meaningless!”

Although I'm not there yet, the sense we get from the Scriptures and those we watch aging around us is that growing old can be really hard. Life can feel like it went too fast and what was the point of it all? Is it meaningless? *What's it like to grow old? It's not easy.*

As part of the Ockenga program I read a book by an author named Atul Gawande. His parents are from India. He's a surgeon in Boston and teaches at Harvard. In his book *Being Mortal* ([affiliate link](#)) he describes what happens to the body as it ages into these later years. It doesn't sound pleasant. He writes:

Even as our bones and teeth soften, the rest of our body hardens. Blood vessels, joints, the muscle and valves of the heart, and even the lungs pick up substantial deposits of calcium and turn stiff. Under a microscope, the vessels and soft tissues display the same form of calcium that you find in bone. When you reach inside an elderly patient during surgery, the aorta and other major vessels can feel crunchy under your fingers. Research has found that loss of bone density may be an even better predictor of death from atherosclerotic disease than cholesterol levels. As we age, it's as if the calcium seeps out of our skeletons and into our tissues.

To maintain the same volume of blood flow through our narrowed and stiffened blood vessels, the heart has to generate increased pressure. As a result, more than half of us develop hypertension by the age of sixty-five. The heart becomes thicker-walled from having to pump against the pressure, and less able to respond to the demands of exertion. The peak output of the heart therefore decreases steadily from the age of thirty. People become gradually less able to run as far or as fast as they used to or to climb a flight of stairs without becoming short of breath.

As the heart muscle thickens, muscle elsewhere thins. Around age forty, one begins to lose muscle mass and power. By age eighty, one has lost between a quarter and a half of one's muscle weight.

What's it like to grow old? It's not easy. It's hard on our biology and also mentally and emotionally. So how should we treat people who are much older than us? Should we cart them off to nursing homes? Ernest and Evelyn didn't have smart phones. Should we ignore them because they're irrelevant?

2) How should we treat the elderly?

The Bible is very clear that we are to treat older adults with respect and honor. The fifth commandment tells us to honor our parents, our moms and dads. Not just when they're young but elderly too.

Exodus 20:12

“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

The book of Proverbs, another book full of God's wisdom for everyday life, says there's something special about the elderly—that there's a kind of glory about them.

Proverbs 16:31

Gray hair is a crown of splendor;
it is attained in the way of righteousness.

That doesn't mean that everyone who has gray hair is good or wise but that gray or white hair may be a sign of a life of wisdom and obedience to God. That maybe they did something right to make it that long. Long life is one of the many ways God can bless his people (Psalm 91:14-16). Another book full of wisdom, wisdom born out of trial, comes from the man Job.

Job 12:12

Is not wisdom found among the aged?
Does not long life bring understanding?

Job is saying that those who have seen a lot of years, and made it through, have something to offer us, wisdom (Deut 32:7). He's saying they deserve our attention. One way we can respect the elderly is by listening to their stories and advice. This is one of the reasons I've gotten coaching from some older guys. The more gray hair the better. I want your years of experience and input so that I don't have to make the same mistakes you've made.

This also means just caring about what they have to offer. There's three women—Barb, Mary, and G'ma Joyce—who are in their 80s and 90s back in my hometown of Estes Park Colorado that I still send email prayer requests to. When I was considering joining the military out of college I asked them to pray for me and they did and I didn't end up joining. Their prayers worked! They've continued to pray for me and encourage me.

I also go to my parents for their wisdom. They have a lot of it to offer. One of the ways we can show respect to our elders and embrace the concept of aging is by celebrating age. When you turn 50, celebrate 50, not 29. It's a major accomplishment. When we pretend to not grow older we imply that aging is bad, but it's not. The side-effects may be difficult but age itself is something to celebrate.

How might God be calling you personally to be in relationship with the elderly? When I lived with Ernest and Evelyn it gave me a chance to be in relationship with them. I mowed their lawn, vacuumed, and got free rent, but I also ate dinner with them sometimes and talked with them. Again during seminary I lived with another older lady named Jane. But sometimes we can fail to honor the elderly like we should. Jane had an allergy to perfumes and scents. I wasn't supposed to have scented deodorant or shampoo, and you know what, I didn't listen. I didn't take her seriously. Was it because she was old? I wasn't as respectful as I should have been and I'm sorry about that. Sometimes when we're young we make foolish choices. The elderly can do that too, but it's good to listen to the elderly and care what they think. Jane loved me too. I performed a funeral for her cat. If you're Elderly, how might God be calling you to be in relationship with teenagers and those younger than you? How can you show them respect?

How might God be calling us corporately to be in relationship with the elderly? What can we do as a church community to love, respect, and care for those in their final chapter of life? The elderly have as much dignity and value as the young. We're all made in God's image. Let's honor them!

God does seem to be doing something at Cornerstone to reach out to the elderly. When I came back from this Ockenga retreat on healthcare and aging I interviewed the director of the Housing Authority and out of that we put up *Rides for Residents* posters at their facilities to give a ride to church to anyone who wants one. We haven't had any takers yet but God still seems to be working. Not long after this my wife Monica's previous boss, a non-profit called Bridges Together, called Monica and asked her if she would be willing to apply for a grant to run an intergenerational program connecting older adults with kids, a program that she's

familiar with and has run before. Maybe we can have some of our church kids get to know some of the older adults at the Housing Authority and some of us who have a few years can come help too. Or maybe we can run Christianity Explored there or the Lord will give us some other opportunity.

God has given us such a gift through the elderly. They're just as valuable as anyone else. *How should we treat the elderly? With respect, care, and by being in relationship with them.* And finally...

3) How should we live today knowing one day (Lord willing) we'll grow old?

I actually want to go back to the first verse.

Ecclesiastes 12:1a

Remember your Creator

in the days of your youth...

God invites us to be in relationship with him because if he's our Creator he knows how to walk through every part of life in a God-honoring manner, even aging. This doesn't mean it will be easy. When God created humankind (Adam and Eve in the garden) he didn't make it so that we'd fall apart like we do today. People disobeyed God by choosing a piece of fruit instead of him and that messed everything up. Now aging feels more like a curse than a blessing. That's not how it's supposed to be. We are supposed to grow old without our teeth falling out and veins hardening. That's a result of the fall, a consequence of our sin.

God has solved the problem of dying from old age. He did it by sending his son Christ Jesus into this world to take on our sin. But in order to redeem our lives his life was cut short. He died young so that you and I can live forever with God. He gave up his old age so that you and I won't be stopped by our old age. And in some mysterious way, the Son was the perfect sacrifice because he was both young, approximately thirty-three, and old, the everlasting one from eternity past become human in our world. It took an old and young sacrifice to take away our sins.

And the good news is that death only stopped Jesus briefly. We just celebrated Christ's resurrection at Easter — that he rose from the grave conquering sin and death and any who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus will receive eternal life. That means that one day although we may feel the affects of sin and growing old, and we may even die from it, death won't have the last word.

How should we live today knowing that one day (Lord willing) we'll grow old? Have a relationship with Christ Jesus. He has conquered death and freely offers you his eternal life.

When I was in college my roommate died. My "roommate" (who was actually a "housemate") was in her late 70s and had dementia. After a year of living with Ernest and Evelyn, at the beginning of my senior year, Evelyn died. Her old age killed her. I was one of the pallbearers carrying her casket to her grave. But she knew Jesus Christ. That means death isn't the end of her story. That means old age and dementia won't have the final word. She remembered her Creator in the days of her youth, but also in her mid-life, and in her elder years, and now she's with Jesus.

One day Evelyn will be resurrected from the grave and given her old body back, but it will be brand new, as good as ever. Ernest just died a couple months ago and although I couldn't be there I wrote a eulogy for his funeral which his grandson read. I look forward to one day being in relationship with them both either in heaven or at the resurrection. Until then I'm grateful I got to be in relationship with them, to love them, and respect them, and I want to challenge us all and as a church to go out and find our Ernests and our Evelyns and go and love them and be in relationship with them. Let's honor the elderly together.

Discussion Questions

These questions are great for small groups, bible studies, or personal devotionals:

1. What emotions surface as you think of growing old?
2. What stood out to you from Ecclesiastes' metaphors for growing old?
3. How have you acted about your own age? Is it something you celebrate or hide?
4. How does scripture honor the elderly?
5. Is the Holy Spirit inviting you to build a relationship with someone in their later years? Who?
6. How does Jesus' death at a young age for us change the way we grow old?
7. Who is one older person for whom you can pray?



[Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 Sermon Link](#)

Christ in Culture Series

Want to learn more about what it means to live faithfully in our culture today? Check out our [Christ in Culture](#) YouTube playlist.

Recommended Resources

Each of the following are **affiliate links**, which means I get a small percentage if you purchase the resource through the link. I also recommend checking out your local library, thrift store, or [library app](#).

[Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End](#) by Atul Gawande (affiliate link)

Sources

Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used with permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

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[Gawande, Atul. Being Mortal](#) (pp. 29-30). Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition. (affiliate link)

Rev. Dr. Jonathan Romig originally preached this revised sermon at [Cornerstone Congregational Church](#) in Westford, MA on May 11th, 2019 when he served there as Pastor. You can access a digital version on [Substack](#) and [Blogger](#) and download a sermon manuscript PDF on [archive.org](#). Jonathan attended [Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary](#) (GCTS) where he earned his Master of Divinity (M.Div) and Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) degrees. No AI was used in the writing or editing of this sermon.